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Twelve Strategies That Increase Your Odds of Getting the Job

an E-book by
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Prologue

At the time of this writing (early 2009), the economic and unemployment situation for America is bleak at best. There are many more people looking for jobs than there are jobs available. It follows then, that you will have much stiffer competition when looking for meaningful employment in today's job market than in recent years.

In order to be hired, **it is no longer enough to simply be qualified and available**. You will likely be just one applicant in a sea of applicants, who are all qualified for, and seeking, the same vacant position. What is a person to do?

In today's job market, the winning strategy is to do everything possible (and ethical) to put odds in your favor. This e-book was written to teach you twelve strategies that will help you position yourself as the candidate chosen over the others when experience and skill sets are virtually the same.

The Twelve Strategies

On the following pages, I outline twelve strategies I have learned over the years, (both as a hiring manager and as a job candidate) which will give you an edge over the vast majority of your competition. Do not misunderstand me; I am not saying these strategies *guarantee* you will be selected. I am saying that by following each of these, you will be placing yourself in a much more favorable position to be selected.

But let's be realistic, here. Let's say you and 500 other candidates apply for the same open position, and the hiring manager only needs one person. Now let's suppose that, *before* applying my strategies, you would have come in 128th out of the 500 candidates, and *after* applying my strategies you improve your standing to being 2nd out of the 500. You will likely never know it. From your perspective, all you know is that you applied for the position, but were not selected. In most cases, you never know how many people you are up against. Why then, should you believe me, if you aren't able to verify what I say? Certainly, you can follow your own path and still get hired. Given enough time, everyone gets hired eventually. But, "eventually" probably isn't the timeframe you had in mind.

The strategies I offer in this e-book are based upon my years of experience as a hiring manager, plus conversations with numerous other hiring managers. There have been many, if not most, candidates I have selected who were not the *most* qualified for the position in the traditional sense (i.e., their skills and experience were the closest match to the skills and experience I listed in the job ad.) Why would I do that?

Well, think about it for a moment. As a hiring manager, I can read your list of skills and experiences from the résumé you sent me. If that were the only information I needed in order to make a decision, then why have interviews? Hiring managers conduct interviews because there is so much more to the decision than what is listed on the résumé. A hiring manager needs to evaluate your verbal communication skills, your ability to make a persuasive case, your extemporaneous knowledge of the subject matter, your demeanor, and other intangibles. These can only be discerned through a real-time interactive exchange of dialogue. The vast majority of job seekers only concern themselves with meeting the requirements listed in the job ad and prepare no further. Those are the candidates you will surpass by using my twelve strategies.

#1: Check your Google

More and more, employers today are checking you out on the internet prior to making hiring decisions about you. In the past, most employers relied only on the information they could discern from the résumé/interview process and the feedback given to them by the references you supplied. In a few cases, employers would pay outside resources to perform a "background check" prior to making you a bona fide offer.

Today, it is an easy process for a hiring manager to simply go online, "Google" a candidate's name, and see what pops up. If something turns up that is a potential concern, the employer may ask you about it during the interview. Because of this, you need to perform the same check on yourself and find out what, if any, information is being made public about you. Doing this will allow you to prepare a response in advance, to possible awkward questions posed by the interviewer.

Some things that may be of concern to a potential employer might include:

- Any blogs you authored that reveal an opinion or bias you may have regarding the employer.

- Any website you operate which espouses a point of view that is in conflict with the employer's branding.

- Any anti-social behavior (e.g., criminal, dishonest, or immoral activities.)

- Any information attributed to you that appears to be in conflict with your résumé.

If you find incriminating, unprofessional, or controversial information attributed to you, whether true or not, you need to prepare a response in advance of beginning a job search. Few things are as damaging in an interview as being confronted about information the hiring manager found attributed to you on the internet – and not being able to allay their concerns.

So, "Google" yourself and find out if you need to do some damage control.

#2: Visit the company website

Just as the potential employer can go online and check *you* out prior to an interview, you can check *them* out as well – and you should. You should always perform at least a minimum amount of research on any potential employer. This serves two purposes:

1. You will present a favorable impression to the hiring manager as someone who does their homework and is specifically interested in joining their company, as opposed to someone simply looking for employment at no place in particular.

2. You may discover aspects of the employer's business model, company vision, or company mission which might cause you to have concerns. For example, if you have a moral objection to the military, then it may be useful to you to find out that their major customer is the U.S. Army. You can save yourself from wasting your time by finding out such information early on.

In my experience as a hiring manager, I was always favorably impressed by any candidate who was able to discuss the latest news release about my company and could recite my CEO's name. On the other hand, I was always equally UN-impressed by candidates who displayed ignorance of even the most basic of information about my company (e.g., the nature of our business).

If you are able to display your new-found knowledge of their company in a manner that appears to be information you have kept up with for a while, because of your keen interest in this particular company, you will be miles ahead of most of the other candidates.

#3: Keep up to date about résumé practices

I recently ran across a copy of a 30-year-old résumé belonging to my wife. In reading it over, I was amazed at how much the acceptable information for a résumé has evolved over the years. The majority of the changes have come about due to modifications to the law, which bar discrimination of certain protected classes during the hiring process. Other information no longer found on résumés has simply been a product of cultural evolution. We have evolved from a primarily industrial society to a service society. So-called "soft" skills are in greater demand now than 30 years ago.

In today's environment, the following information should NEVER appear on your résumé:

- Your age

- Your gender

- Your ethnicity

- Your sexual orientation

- Your religious views

- Your marital status

- Number of dependants

- Your health status

- Any disabilities

In today's environment, the following information *typically should not* appear on your résumé, <u>unless</u> it is directly related to the performance of the job (e.g., including your photo could be relevant to an application as a model):

- Your hobbies

- Your photo

- Your height, weight, or other physical description

In today's environment, the following information, although not inappropriate, has devolved into less relevance in today's job market. You should consider the following:

- Provide a *Summary* statement rather than an *Objective* statement at the beginning of your résumé.

- There is no need to include the statement, "References available on request." Nowadays, this is a given.

- Limit your résumé to <u>no more than three pages</u>. Two pages is best. One page is too few.

- If you have a long work history and cannot fit it all on three pages, consider listing only the most recent employment and following it by adding a variation of the statement, "Work history prior to [*year*] available on request."

You can be sure that the hiring manager is aware of current résumé norms. You should be, too. If you have been out of the job market for a while and wonder if any of the rules have changed, there is a plethora of examples to be found on the internet. Also, the major job boards offer free advice on writing your résumé for today's market (e.g., indeed.com, CareerBuilder.com, Monster.com.)

#4: Dress for the interview – not the job

During my years as a hiring manager, I found the issue of appropriate attire for a job interview to be one of the most misunderstood among candidates. In my experience, I had a handful of candidates whose attire cost them the job, the majority whose attire neither helped nor hurt their chances, and a handful whose interview attire was a contributing factor to their being selected.

In which category do you want to be?

Although there will always be a few (very few!) exceptions, how you dress for an interview can play a critical part in your selection as the successful candidate. Even if you happen to know that the place to which you are applying has a very casual work environment and allows its employees to come to work in cut-off jeans, tank top, and flip-flops, you should not take this to be the way you should dress for the interview (unless you are specifically told to dress a certain way by the interviewer or their representative prior to the interview.) Very seldom are you told by the interviewer what you are expected to wear to the meeting. So what should you do?

One of the few things that has not changed in the last hundred years regarding job interview protocol is that dressing conservatively puts the odds in your favor. Short of wearing a tuxedo or floor-length evening gown, <u>it is not possible to overdress for a job interview</u>. As the old saying goes, "If two candidates applied for the same job and were equally qualified, but one wore a suit and the other did not, who would get the job?" The answer, overwhelmingly, is that the candidate in the suit gets the job.

Dressing up for your job interview demonstrates:

- Your respect for the interviewer and the occasion.

- Your level of professionalism.

- Your interview "savvy" (i.e., you know how the game is played.)

#5: Make your cover letter personal

Your first contact with your potential employer will most likely come from his/her reading of your cover letter. This will act as a "virtual" first impression. As with all first impressions, it can be positive, negative, or neutral. Naturally, you want it to be a positive first impression.

First of all, let me make it very clear what the purpose of your cover letter is:

> **The purpose of your cover letter is to get your résumé read. No more. No less.**

Believe it or not, you should spend at least as much time and thought into developing your cover letter as you do your résumé. It is <u>that</u> important! Consequently, you want to customize each cover letter for each separate submittal.

A cover letter offers opportunities not available to you on your résumé, allowing you to:

- Explain why you are sending the résumé and how you learned about the position.

- Explain why you are interested in that specific employer or type of work.

- Demonstrate that you are familiar with the company.

- Address the reader by name and/or title.

- Provide supporting information about only the specific, relevant aspects of your skills and experience.

Be aware though, that a poorly designed cover letter can hurt your chances rather than help. If the reader perceives your cover letter as being boilerplate in nature with an insertion of their name to make an otherwise generic communication appear personalized, it could result in a negative "virtual" first impression and defeat the purpose of your cover letter (see bold type above.)

#6: Always have questions ready

At some point during the job interview, usually near the end, the interviewer will ask, "Do you have any questions for me?" It is a precious gift. Never throw it away. Leveraged to their fullest, the questions you ask can carry more weight than the answers you have given up to that point!

Before you show up for your next interview, you will no doubt have spent some time preparing answers to questions you think will most likely be asked of you. That is a wise strategy. If the interviewer has also prepared wisely, the questions asked of you will have been purposely selected to reveal your suitability to the position for which you are being interviewed. Like many interviewers, I long ago developed a standard set of questions to suit my purposes. I generally ask the same questions of each candidate, judging each answer in relation to their competition's answer to the same question.

Is there one question in my repertoire that I consider to be the most revealing? Why, yes. There is. That question is, "Do you have any questions for me?"

Give due diligence to this opportunity you are handed near the end of your interview. It will allow you to create a defining moment. I am frequently amazed at job candidates who have persevered through my interview session with them, only to turn down the precious gift I offer them—to ask questions of me! Have you ever been asked by your interviewer if you had any questions for them, only to reply, "No?" I think you've answered everything I wanted to know." If you take nothing else away from this chapter, learn this:

Never, ever pass up the opportunity to ask your interviewer some questions!

As with most things, there are questions that will help you, questions that will hurt you, and questions that do neither. Don't just ask questions because I said you should. What will increase your odds of being selected here is not the interviewer's answers, but having the interviewer hear the questions you chose to ask. It is a golden opportunity. Don't throw it away.

Here are some examples of poor question choices:

- Would I be working in a cubicle or an office?

- Do you have casual Fridays here?

- Is there a cafeteria in the building?

- What day is payday here?

Consider, instead, these examples:

- What would be the greatest challenge for someone filling this position?

- Can you walk me through what a typical day would be like in this role?

- How does this position support your company's objectives?

- After spending this time with me, what would you consider to be my weak points and how would you recommend I improve on them?

I especially like the last example. It not only instantly makes your interviewer become your mentor and advisor (and, logically, your ally) but also gives you a read on how you fared in the interview—no more wondering.

Can you see the obvious difference in the types of questions in the first list versus the second list? In the first list, the questions reveal your interest in what the potential job could do for you. In the second list, the questions indicate a desire on your part to be what the interviewer wants you to be. If you were the interviewer (i.e., the decision maker), which set of questions would be most endearing to you? Exactly.

As I said, I have a standard set of questions I use in nearly every interview. You should also develop a standard set of questions that you will use whenever an interviewer asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" Give your repertoire of questions a lot of thought. Rehearse them so you can ask them without pulling out a piece of paper to read them. You need to ask them as if they were a natural result of your keen interest in the position being discussed.

#7: Provide answers to the unasked questions

So, what the heck am I talking about? What "unanswered" questions?

During my years as a hiring manager, I began to notice there was a set of questions I would mentally ask myself about a candidate both during and after my interview with them. The answers to these questions was vital in my decision-making, but I never asked these questions of the candidate – I only asked myself - and then surmised what the answer would have been, based on my perceptions during the interview.

What are these questions and why didn't I simply ask the candidate during the interview? Because the candidate would either not know the answer or would not be truthful. Here are the questions I, as well as most hiring managers, ask themselves about a candidate:

- Are your expectations realistic?

- How much effort did you put into preparing for this interview?

- Are you respecting me?

- Will you fit in?

- If I hire you, how will that make me look?

Compose your own set of answers to these "unasked" questions and memorize them. During the course of your interview, insert your answers into the conversation. Because they were not solicited, the hiring manager will use your answers instead of their own.

#8: Revise your online résumé weekly

When you post your résumé to one or more of the major online job boards (e.g., indeed.com, Monster.com, CareerBuilder.com, ComputerJobs.com, etc.) and mark it as searchable, it appears in various reports that are seen by potential employers.

What most posters don't know is that the list of résumés can be so voluminous that only the first few are meaningful. Which résumés are sorted to the top of the list by the job boards? Those which have been created or modified most recently. Consequently, whenever you log in to the job board and edit your résumé, it jumps to the top of the list.

It is a good idea then, to make some edit to each of your posted résumés often. I recommend weekly. Even if you have no modifications you need to make, you can open your résumé file, overtype any letter with the same letter, then save the file.

Because many, if not most, of the recruiters run their online reports at the beginning of the workweek, I recommend making your résumé "edits" each weekend. That way, your résumé will be among the first listed on the report.

#9: Provide samples of your work

Of course, not all occupations are the type where a sample of your work can be sent through email or brought to an interview. If this is the case for you, consider gathering a few testimonials from past superiors and co-workers. The point is that anytime you can put something tangible in the hands of the hiring manager, rather than simply telling them about your accomplishments, it will be much more persuasive.

If you were a hiring manager and you interviewed two candidates with equal qualifications, one *told* you about the bridge they built and the other candidate *showed* you a picture, which would be more compelling? There is a reason the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words" and not vice-versa.

Some tangible examples of your work might include:

- An actual physical instance of something you produced.

- A written testimonial from a superior or co-worker.

- A photo of something you produced.

- A certificate of accomplishment.

- A prototype of something you designed and/or produced.

A few words of caution: if you bring examples of your work to an interview, don't force them on the interviewer. Most interviewers want to see them, but a few don't. Offer them, but don't push it.

If at all possible, provide examples that the interviewer can keep. While a portfolio of your work, contained in a leather-bound folder with plastic sheet protectors and index tabs may be impressive looking, if the interviewer can't keep it for review at a later time, they are forced to examine it during the interview. This can be awkward if the interviewer did not allow time for such an occasion.

#10: Ensure your résumé is easy to skim

News Flash! This just in...

The hiring manager will probably never read all of your résumé.

Surprised? Don't be. In fact, the hiring manager will probably only read the top half of the first page before making the first decision about it -- which pile to place it in. There are just too many résumés to process and too little time. Ideally, the hiring manager would carefully scrutinize every word of every résumé received, but that's not reality.

In today's job market, "ideal" rarely describes the process. If your cover letter does not entice the hiring manager to move on to your résumé, and your résumé does not grab him/her within the first twenty seconds, your résumé will be relegated to the wrong pile. Typically, a hiring manager will do a cursory skim of each résumé and place them into one of three piles:

1. The ones that they definitely want to review further.

2. The ones that they will review further *only* if all of pile #1 doesn't work out.

3. The ones that they do not want to look at again – ever.

Into which pile do you want your résumé placed? Exactly.

So, how do you go about increasing your odds of being placed into pile #1? By making it easy to skim. Take a look at the three example résumés below.

Even though the content of the résumés was (purposely) too small to read, you were still able to form a "first glance" impression of whether it was appealing to you or not. What were you able to glean from these three examples without being able to read even the first word of their content? Simply by the layout and design, you were able to ascertain:

- The number of pages of each résumé (the résumé on the left has two pages, the middle has four, and the résumé on the right has one page.)

- Whether there was liberal use of white space or if the text was very busy (easy to skim vs. difficult to skim.)

As the hiring manager, suppose your requirements included "*6-8 years experience, good written communication skills, and a passion for excellence.*" Would you be able to make an educated guess as to which of these three résumés might be worth pursuing? Yes. Only the résumé on the left could possibly meet all three stated requirements. The résumé in the middle probably has the required years of experience, but likely does not have good written communication skills or a passion for excellence, since the applicant was unwilling to put much effort into determining the best format for their résumé. The résumé on the right likely does not have the required 6-8 years experience since it only contains ½ page of content.

When pressed for time, hiring managers will frequently revert to these "first glance" measures to quickly sort through the received résumés -- and hiring managers are *always* pressed for time.

Remember. The purpose of your résumé is to get you the interview – not the job. Don't try to cram verbiage about everything you ever did into your résumé. Create your résumé to deliver a listing of your relevant skills and accomplishments. Leave them interested, but wanting to know more.

#11: Remember - it's not about your needs

Job-hunting is a marketing project. You are trying to convince someone to buy a brand called YOU. Take a look at the following two examples of a roadside billboard and think about which one you would more likely do business with.

#1

We haven't had much business lately and we owe a lot of money.

Help us out by letting us sell you something.

#2

Our product is known worldwide as having the highest quality at the lowest cost.

Call us today to find out how we can work together to help you.

Did you choose billboard #2?

"Obviously!", you say?

If it is obvious, then why do so many job candidates use the same approach as billboard #1 when going through the job-hunting process? Most candidates will fill their cover letter, résumé, and interview dialogue with verbiage about how being selected would fulfill their career aspirations and would give them endless personal satisfaction. Some candidates will even pontificate about how much they need the job.

So, what is wrong with these reasons? Shouldn't I articulate them if they are true?

NO!

Just as with our two billboard examples on the previous page, your customer (i.e., the employer you are trying to convince to hire you) does not – and should not – care about how hiring you would make *you* better. The employer is not looking for someone who *will be helped* by working for them – they are looking for someone *to help* the company in its business!

In every step along the way, always remember that you need to convince the potential employer that hiring you will be in <u>*their*</u> best interest – not yours.

#12: Be likeable

After all is said and done, if the hiring manager, for whatever reason, simply doesn't like you, it is doubtful you will be hired. So, put on your best face, smile, be gracious, and non-controversial.

"But, that's not fair!", you say? You are correct.

Is making likeability a factor in the hiring decision fair? Absolutely not.

Will likeability be a factor whether it's fair or not? Absolutely.

Will the use of the likeability factor be acknowledged by the decision maker? No way.

Life isn't fair – and neither is the hiring process.

If the hiring manager is the person to whom you would directly report if hired, then he/she naturally prefers to hire someone they wouldn't mind being around every day. If you are the most qualified, but come off as obnoxious, arrogant, or insensitive – and the runner-up is nearly as qualified as you, but is perceived as low maintenance, guess who will be selected? Not you.

Be likeable. Turns out, much of it *is* a popularity contest.

Epilogue

There are, of course, many other strategies which can help increase your odds of being hired. I have presented what I consider to be the top twelve. If you follow my suggestions, you will be doing things that 95% of the other candidates will not. That puts you ahead of them in consideration for the position.

All of this assumes you are, first and foremost, qualified to do the job. There is little that can ethically be done to make up for incompetence. By following my twelve strategies though, you will be better positioned to secure the job, even if you are not the *most* qualified candidate, but simply the qualified candidate who "connected" with the interviewer.

Good luck!